
A Response to "Sexism in the English Language"

Naomi Stinson

This article is a response to to Piercey's (2000) Perspectives article "Sexism in the English Language" published in last issue of the *TESL Canada Journal/La Revue TESL du Canada*.

Piercey says there is inherent sexism in the English language. This would mean that the language deliberately discriminates against one sex in favor of the other. But gender is not sex; sex is not gender. Gender rules in language have nothing to do with sex or sexism. In the five languages I speak, the rules of grammar dictate that the masculine noun or pronoun stands for both genders when no one person or thing is specified. As we used to say in high school, "Ladies first except in French grammar," which was a jocular way of reinforcing this grammatical rule.

So first, let me clear up the increasingly prevalent incorrect use of the word *gender*. Again, gender is not synonymous with sex. Because the English language is less cursed with gender than many others, it is easy to forget that in the Romance languages everything—from tables and chairs to buildings and countries—has gender. To quote the redoubtable Fowler (1984), "gender, n., is a grammatical term only. To talk of *persons or creatures of the masculine or feminine gender*, meaning of the male or female sex, is either a jocularly (permissible or not according to context) or a blunder" (p. 211). People and animals are of the male or female sex. *Male* and *female* refer to sex, not gender, which is expressed three ways: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Masculine means "like a man," feminine means "like a woman," and neuter means "like neither." Once we start talking of male gender, female gender, and, uh, neuter gender, we are on a slippery slope of dehumanizing the human race. Or at least desexing it! Also, the use of *gender* seems to be a part of the political correctness movement, or perhaps it is just plain prudery and *gender* is used because in our sex-crazed world sex seems to refer only to the act of copulation. These days when I fill out a form that asks for my gender, I correct the word to *sex* and then write *F*. They want to know whether I am male or female, not whether I am feminine or otherwise. I no longer change *gender* to *sex* in the academic writing I edit, because I am outnumbered and I am tired of arguing.

I agree with Piercey that sexism still permeates our world. Women have had a raw deal all through the centuries, and much needs to change before we can rest. For example, there are shelters for abused women and their

children in almost every town. Why is it that the men who abuse women are not removed from their homes so that the guiltless battered women and their children can remain? Why is it so hard for professional women to have children? Because taking time away from their work is damaging to their careers. Why are so many children in day care while their mothers work outside the home, and why are day care workers, who are mostly women, so poorly paid?

Nevertheless, although sexism is alive and well in people's attitudes, I believe that we have made progress in eliminating much sexism in the language. However, I wonder when physicians will stop taking the credit for delivering babies when it is women who do this. Oddly enough, in Spanish, the strongly gendered language that gave us the word *macho*, the doctor *attends* the woman, who "gives the child to light." I wonder too when menopause will stop being a disease in the minds of some physicians, but that is another story.

English is a much less "sexist" language than many others, precisely because it is less gendered. Consider the Romance languages. In Spanish your parents are *padres* (fathers), your grandparents *abuelos* (grandfathers), your children *hijos* (sons), your cousins *primos* (again, the masculine noun), and your friends *amigos*. In English all these nouns can refer to either sex. In Edmonton the Bishop of the Anglican diocese is a woman. In talking of her to my Chilean friend, I asked what one could call her in Spanish. The Spanish word for bishop is *obispo*: could we call her the *obispa*? I thought not. We can, however, call her the *prelada* (abbess in my dictionary), a feminization of *prelado* or prelate. It doesn't quite work for me! Also in Spanish, until recently, although you might consult a female physician and could call her *Doctora*, you certainly could not call her a *médica*, the feminine of *médico* (physician), because a *médica* in most Latin American cultures is a medicine woman (feminine of medicine man), that is to say, a herbalist or folk healer. In the United Kingdom teachers used to be referred to as masters and mistresses. Today we call them all teachers and they can be of any sex. However, in French in order to avoid the "sexist" *enseignants*, you must now painstakingly call them collectively *enseignant(e)s*, or so I learned recently from a professional translator.

We now rarely see the word *actress* and call male and female actors just that. The same goes for *executor*—we just don't need *executrix* any more. And surely by now we have enough female physicians that *doctor* will do for all of them (yes, the female ones think they deliver babies too). The story of the female surgeon in the story in Piercey's article no longer works as far as I am concerned. I could cite many other examples, but the point has been made.

The Romance languages have no neuter gender as such. German does; a couple of nouns for female persons are, incomprehensibly, neuter: *das Wasche* (washerwoman) and, *das Mädchen* (little girl, the diminutive of *die Magd*,

girl). I don't pretend to know where this comes from except that it is a rule of grammar and has to do with gender, not sex.

In most of the article Piercey uses the term *gender* correctly. But when she is talking about the use of *he* as the generic term and quotes Spender (1980) as saying "the male gender was more comprehensive than the female," I have to protest. Spender means *masculine gender*. This outmoded use of masculine nouns and pronouns as generic is easy to avoid. It does not have to mean using incorrect grammar as in "Anyone can play if *they* learn" (p. 114). There are plenty of handy ways to express this: "Anyone can play if he or she learns" is admittedly awkward. "All can play if they learn," however, is just fine. And *humankind* is a good substitute for *mankind* or *man*. In fact the American Psychological Association *Style Manual* has been saying so for many years and details several ways of avoiding sexist language. Piercey is not saying anything new when she advises teachers to say *police officer* instead of *policeman*; we have been doing so for years. In my work over 20 years I have seen much of the sexist language eliminated from the texts I edit; and I have made my own contribution to this by carefully rewording certain phrases before they go to print.

As for the English language being man-made, Aboriginal people do not think so: "Language is a gift from the Creator" (Chief Mike Mitchell, in Kirkness, p. 1). Aboriginal people believe we were given our languages by the Creator, and I have to wonder if this is not true given the huge number and complexity of languages worldwide. On the other hand, Kipling (1978) is fairly sure written language at least was invented by a little girl. Taffimai Metallumai (Taffy for short), the "little girl daughter" of Tegumai-Bopsulai and Teshumai Tewindrow, first constructed the alphabet ("How the Alphabet was Made") and then wrote "The First Letter." She wrote it to her mother and it was incomprehensible to anyone else. Kipling wrote this story at the turn of the century when life for women in India or Britain was anything but fair.

As for this "herstory" stuff, I am really tired of it. I first heard the word in the 1960s and think by now it should have died. I have yet to see people wishing to change *histology* (a branch of biology dealing with the study of tissues, Gk *histos*—web) to "herstology" or *histrionic* (pertaining to actors or acting, Gk *histrio*—actor) to "herstrionic." *History* derives from a Middle English word, *historie*, which itself is derived from Latin (*historia*) and Greek (*historia*), and means learning or knowledge by inquiry (*Webster's*, 1989). It has nothing to do with *his* or *hers*.

The English language is no more sexist than any other language; the world has been and continues to be a sexist place. But this is changing. Change does not happen overnight, and teachers of first and second languages have a clear role to play in this change. Do you think at the same time they might try to teach correct pronunciation and usage? Far more pervasive

than a little so-called sexism are the astonishing misuses one hears every day. I have recently heard *rile* instead of *roil* and was stunned to hear *short-lived* pronounced to rhyme with *jived*. Several times I have heard the word *pleasantries* used as if it meant pleasant remarks. Writers use *likely* for *probably*, *utilize* for *use*, and probably will continue to use *while* instead of *although*. This latter error has become so common that it is not unusual to see *during the time that* instead of *while*. And how many times a day does one hear or read *mind-boggling* instead of *the mind boggles*? I cannot think of any way to halt the creeping epidemic of language misuse, but we are well on the way to rooting out the sexism.

The Author

Naomi Stinson is a professional editor with 20 years of experience editing books and journals in various fields of education. Before coming to Canada in 1979, she lived and worked in various countries in South America and the Caribbean.

References

- Kipling, R. (1978). *Just so stories*. New York: Chatham River Press (first published in 1902).
Kirkness, V. (1989). Editor's note. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 16(2), 1-2.
Fowler, H.W. (1984). *A dictionary of modern English usage*. Ware, UK: Omega.
Piercey, M. (2000). Sexism in the English language. *TESL Canada Journal/La revue TESL du Canada*, 17(2), 110-115.
Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary. (1989). New York: Portland House.